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(Re)encountering monsters: animals in early twentieth century weird fiction

Abstract

Early twentieth century weird tales occupy an important place in the development of genre fictions. Among the innovations they contribute are new forms of monsters, diverging from earlier Gothic or mythological traditions, which spring, in part, from a strand of post-Darwinian thought that understood any bodily shape to be possible in adaptation to environmental conditions. This paper explores three stories which, by staging human encounters with animal monsters of radical unknown shapes, suggest new ways in which humans and animals might relate to each other: William Hope Hodgson's *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (1908), Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Horror of the Heights' (1913) and Will A. Page' 'The Air Serpent' (1911). The encounter between characters and monsters is at root a colonial encounter between humans and the natural world, and often a violent one. By presenting weird animals as monstrous, the stories engage a number of anxieties associated with human-animal kinship and evolutionary superiority. By presenting monsters as strange Others but also as fellow creatures fit for their environments, however, these tales reach towards understanding animals as subjects in their own right with a claim to existing in their own spaces, destabilising the anthropocentric assumptions with which the human characters approach their adventures.

Keywords

monster; animal; environment; anthropocentricism; colonialism; human-animal encounter

Weird tales specialise in attempts to represent the unrepresentable, the truly alien and unknown. In the early twentieth century, narratives such as William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land* (1912) and Algernon Blackwood's 'The Willows' (1907) hint at the awesome transdimensional forces of an indifferent cosmos – what H. P. Lovecraft later described as the 'scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim'.[1] But in distant skies, remote seas, and unmapped islands, Earth spawns weird monsters too – animal monsters, strangely-bodied species previously unknown to folklore, myth, fiction or science.

This paper examines three weird tales of human encounters with animal monsters: Hodgson's *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (1908), Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Horror of the Heights' (1913) and the latter's American predecessor, 'The Air Serpent' (1911) by Will A. Page.[2] Like cosmic horror tales, these narratives expose human insignificance in the universe, while their attempt to convey alterity eschews traditional monstrous forms. Animal monsters reveal the limits to scientific mastery over the natural world. They appear monstrous because they violate existing norms and knowledge systems; they flourish in environments in which humans are unfit

and cannot dominate. These tales unsettle a colonialist centrism structuring relationships between humans and the more-than-human world, suggesting that other ways of thinking about and relating to animals, including respect for their subjectivity and right to exist in the world, may exist. Yet the creatures remain threatening; as interstitial monsters they encapsulate the ambivalence of the cultural moment producing these stories, in which ethics of human and animal relationships are only starting to shift.

These early twentieth century weird tales lie between the late Victorian Gothic and early scientific romances of H. G. Wells, and the later work of Lovecraft and the pulp science fiction of the 1920s onwards. Changing depictions of human-animal encounters from the late nineteenth century onwards affected the development of science fiction; as Sherryl Vint has argued, a cultural shift towards recognising animals as subjects in their own right underpins the representation of aliens in twentieth and twenty-first century science fiction.[3] Since both sf and animal studies extrapolate from known science,

> the genre's imaginings of animal being are inclined to incorporate knowledge gained from ethology (the scientific study of animal behaviour) and thus to approximate what we know of animals' experiences of their worlds. Such an impulse is present even in early sf written before the development of such holistic methods of studying animal behaviour.[4]

The later emergence of the sf alien partly depends on earlier moves in genre fictions. While Vint's example of 'early sf' is drawn from *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s, an impulse to represent animal being is evident in earlier weird and science fictions, too. It is identifiable in Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912) as well as in the texts I discuss here.[5] The adjustment is not easy for *fin-de-siècle* stories – they remain ambivalent about human-animal encounters even while staging them in innovative ways – but they do begin to register recognition of animal being and the concerns that attend it.

Conceptions of animals and their relationships with humans were changing radically under the revelations of science throughout the Victorian period, producing varied responses. Between disciplines from geology and palaeontology to physiology and biology, natural history was being rewritten to suggest much closer kinships, both now and in the deep past, between humans and other animals than either Enlightenment science or the Christian creation myth had conventionally held. Together, the common ancestry, gradual evolution of species, and the ecological entanglement of life on earth set out in Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) challenged humanity's position as divinely-created masters in the world, separate from other animals.[6] One

effect was increasing recognition of animals as fellow creatures, worthy of respect and in need of protection: 'the displacement of humankind from a central position in the universe' had a 'corollary [of] a raising of the status of other species and a promotion of a sense of kinship between humans and animals'.[7] Positive attitudes to animals registered in conservation movements, increased popularity of pets and aquaria, for example, and a readiness amongst authors to locate animals more centrally in their narratives.[8]

Notions of common ancestry and species existing in states of flux rather than as fixed forms, however, were also troubling. The scientific frameworks of evolutionary theory 'posited the essential mutability of bodies, and the theory of natural selection seemed to show that any morphic transmutation was possible, given time, chance, and species variability'.[9] Fictional explorations of the more threatening implications of mutability have often been identified in late Victorian Gothic. Well-known figures such as Edward Hyde, Helen Vaughan, and Dracula are read as decadent degenerates, atavistic resurrections in the present of humankind's biological past, or as reminders that body shapes were far from fixed and could evolve towards more primitive forms as easily as towards increasing complexity.[10] The eponymous Beetle of Richard Marsh's 1897 novella shifts its shape between man, woman, and scarab, and in Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) the unstable body of the dying Helen Vaughan mutates between recognisable forms and the formlessness of primordial slime.[11]

Monsters in (some of the time) human shape dominate this period. By the early twentieth century, although concerns over human degeneration and monstrosity still circulated, forms anticipating the kinds of animal aliens identified by Vint were more common in popular fiction, as the monstrous trees, giant cuttle-fish, weed man, air snakes and nameless floating entities of Hodgson's, Doyle's and Page's stories exemplify. When perceived as monsters, these are troubling creatures. As Jeffrey Cohen puts it, monsters are 'disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions'.[12] Monsters resist a fixed state or assimilation within existing systems of knowledge; they are interstitial, things of in-between identity. Animal monsters embody an uncomfortable tension between understanding animals as fellow creatures and fearing that kinship as threatening.

Monsters stood for a number of potentially worrying implications of post-Darwinian biology; subjectively, they seemed to undermine the security of distinctions between humans and other species, of human bodily identity, and of the divine ordering of creation. Monstrosity in nature, however, was seen by Darwin, Huxley and others as potentially positive since it might offer clues to explain variability within species.[13] Monstrosities were extreme variations, and while

'systematists', Darwin observed, may dislike finding variability within species, 'individual differences are highly important … they afford materials for natural selection to accumulate'.[14] Further, the unpredictability of monsters indicated that 'a rather messy trial-and-error procedure' had determined humanity's position as dominant species, rather than nature or deity.[15] In this sense, monsters demand an ecological reading – they undermine an anthropocentricity governing human attitudes to the natural world, by highlighting the insufficiency of the knowledge systems that tried to arrange the world for the benefit of a certain group.

Fortunately or unfortunately for scientists in the global north, as nineteenth-century exploration opened up and uncovered new regions of the world, the discovery of creatures conflicting with existing taxonomies was not uncommon. Harriet Ritvo has explored how the first duckbilled platypus specimens to reach Britain were received as monstrous, generating both interest and scepticism, because of the creature's violation of recognised vertebrate structures. Moreover, its 'oddity was not confined to the merely physical but extended to the level of theory or system. ... The indigenous mammals of the southern continent seemed to have been designed according to a plan different from those that shaped the animals of the rest of the globe'.[16] Australiasian marsupials and monotremes appeared monstrous because of their unexpected characteristics or strange blend of otherwise familiar animal traits. They challenged a Eurocentric view of nature represented by centuries of knowledge acquisition through examining, collecting and categorising species. They required the acknowledgement of the existence of a different evolutionary system, a system itself monstrous in its bizarreness, in which the apparently abnormal is normal.

Exploration and empire-building thus enabled access, both practically and imaginatively, to unfamiliar lands and to unfamiliar animals adapted to exotic environments. The unfamiliarity of animals or peoples often led to a construction, in imperial discourse, of difference as monstrous, serving to distance civilised white Europeans from the savage and primitive Other, be that human or animal.[17] Parallels are visible between the structures, values and behaviours of colonialism and those of many human societies towards the natural world, and postcolonial theory has been allied to ecocriticism as a way of uncovering hidden ecological histories, including violences inflicted on the more-than-human world.[18] Val Plumwood, for example, has argued that the historically centric perspectives and frameworks of colonization parallel attitudes and relationships with the non-human world.[19]

In the colonial relationship, the Other is excluded and homogenised; lacking the most valued characteristics or qualities of the coloniser, it does not qualify for the same ethical treatment, but is instead available for occupation and plundering. The dualistic construction of 'them' and 'us'

takes place between 'human' and 'nature' too, which 'reconstructs in highly polarized terms a field where it is really essential to recognize overlap and continuity in order to understand our own nature as ecological, nature-dependent beings and to relate more ethically and less arrogantly to the more-than-human world'.[20] For Plumwood, an ethical shift is required in which animals (and other entities of the world) are recognised as equal participants in the world, resembling the 'exchange across the borders of alterity' identified by Vint in narratives of encounters with animal aliens.[21] Key to this shift is decentrism, the discarding of positions that privilege the needs, values and knowledges of one group over another. 'Frameworks of centrism', Plumwood writes, 'do not provide a basis for sensitive, sympathetic or reliable understanding and observation of either the Other or of the self'.[22] Centric positions, whether androcentric, Eurocentric, or anthropocentric, inhibit ecological ways of thinking and knowing, being and doing. Tales of human-animal encounters can offer a way of exploring and potentially destabilising such centric relationships.

We might ask, however, to what extent early twentieth century weird tales are capable of challenging centrism, given that the structures Plumwood identifies are still not yet eroded. My argument here is that it is through their ambivalent representation of monsters and their use of a weird mode that these stories are able to do so. Cheryl Price, discussing Phil Robinson's 'The Man-Eating Tree' (1881) and Frank Aubrey's *The Devil-Tree of El Dorado* (1896), suggests that colonial tales presenting the natural world as monstrous register not only fear of the environment but also concerns about the impacts of colonial intrusion.[23] Price argues that the anthropophagous trees become the doubles of the consuming imperial explorer; violence is met with violence rather than with any sustainable attempt to understand or handle the exotic colonial environment. The subjective, ambivalent status of monsters is essential for the production of such a subtext. What is a monster, like the platypus, in one environmental context, is normal in its own space. In a land where man-eating trees exist naturally, humans are the maladapted intruders.

As a result of their encounters, human characters in the stories I discuss next reflect on their ecological position to varying degrees, which approximately correlate with the extent to which they perceive the creatures as monstrous other or animal subject. The stories' use of a weird mode is also crucial. Two key characteristics of the weird – its ontological stance, in which the cosmos is indifferent to human concerns, and its emphasis on radical, unrepresentable monstrosity beyond human ken – make it a mode in which anthropocentricity is already fundamentally undermined.

Weird fiction's divergence from earlier fantastic and mythological traditions, China Miéville argues, 'is vividly clear in its teratology'; the weird's 'disproportionately insectile/cephalopodic' bodies are

> without mythic resonance. The spread of the tentacle – a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in 'Western' aesthetics) – from a situation of near total absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture.[24]

Miéville, distinguishing weird cephalopods from the earlier squids of tales like Victor Hugo's 'Toilers of the Sea' (1866), identifies *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* as the first text to spawn a Cthulhu-like tentacled monster.[25] The tentacle becomes a metonym for the radical new body-shapes marking the weird monster.

Weird monsters violate, and expose as inadequate, pre-existing systems of knowledge deriving from either folklore or modern science – including the language that represents them. [26] For Miéville, weird monsters are 'unrepresentable and unknowable, the evasive of meaning… shapes that ostentatiously evade symbolic decoding by being all shapes and no shapes'.[27] Monsters resist comprehension and representation by humans. In this sense, humanity is inevitably decentred in the universes of weird tales; human knowledges, histories, and concerns are useless or irrelevant when it comes to dealing with such entities. Weird tales, although often verging on the supernatural, present their weirdness as natural – human characters thus have to revise their assumptions about their world, to accept the terrible truths of never-before-encountered monsters, alien histories, other dimensions and their own insignificance. Through such epistemological and ontological revisions, the weird overturns anthropocentric structures of thought.

Read ecologically, then, weird offers different opportunities to those of 'ecoGothic'.[28] EcoGothic offers alternative, ecological ways of thinking about a literary mode in which individual concerns are often foregrounded (such as repressed secrets in the human psyche or cultural history, or intense emotional affects on human characters, often in built spaces of cities or institutions). Weird, as I have outlined, stems from a distinct ontological position. In counterpoint to the 'uncanny' of Gothic, Miéville characterises the weird as 'abcanny' (borrowing the prefix from the ab-humans of Hodgson's *The Night Land*).[29] Weird monsters are alien and unknown, he argues, not uncanny revenants: '[t]he awe that Weird Fiction attempts to invoke is a function of lack of recognition, rather than any uncanny resurgence. … The Weird,

rather, impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum'.[30] At root, the weirdness of a monster relates to its radical, unknowable shape, its resistance of meaning, and the effects of encounters with them – the fear or horror they engender figures not as the return of a repressed past, but as profound exposure to alterity.

Abcanny monsters reach towards alien alterity and are distinct from Gothic monsters. Five characteristics set the creatures of *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig',* 'The Horror of the Heights', and 'The Air Serpent' apart. They all belong to species, rather than being distinct individuals like Hyde, Helen Vaughan, Dracula, the Beetle or Arabella Marsh; [31] they are presented as natural products (their monstrosity is subjective, not intrinsic); biologically they are progenerate (they are new species, not degenerate atavisms); they are found in distant locations rather than emerging in the home metropolis; and finally, they survive the end of the narrative (*fin-de-siècle* Gothic tales tend to close with the monster's destruction). These weird animals also produce effects of fear and horror, but they do different cultural work from the monstrous figures of late Victorian Gothic. They are less closely tied to concerns over humanity's bodily identity and past or future moral or physical states than they are to changing ecological attitudes at the *fin-de-siècle*. Encounters with animal monsters in these tales may be ambivalent, but they work, nonetheless, to overturn preconceptions about animals and relationships between the human and more-than-human world, and demand new ways of understanding them, even if those demands cannot yet be fully answered.

The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'

In the nineteenth-century imagination, evolutionary theory authorised the invention of new animals fit for their remote, imagined habitats. The extreme results of variation and natural selection are favoured in environments to which humans are poorly suited. Human narrators register both horror at the monstrous appearance of the unfamiliar animals compared to the norms declaimed by human-defined taxonomies, and fascination with the intriguing possibilities of natural selection. Yet these monsters are generally not individual anomalies but highly successful species, produced, within the world of the text, through the logic of evolutionary adaptation to their environment.

The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig' recounts the adventures of shipwrecked sailors confronting the denizens of unknown lands and struggling to escape the Sargasso Sea. Narrated by Winterstraw, a young English gentleman, each of the novel's two parts is centred on a different island. The 'Land of Lonesomeness' is an island of solemn desolation and fearsome night-time attacks, home to anthropophagous trees. As the sailors flee these terrors, a storm sweeps them into the

weed-filled Sargasso, populated by menacing sea-creatures. From the precarious refuge of another island, the castaways make contact with the remaining crew and passengers of a trapped sailing ship. After violent conflicts with the resident tentacled 'weed men', they free the ship from the grip of the weed and return safely to England.

The weed men are presented as threatening, terrifying, and repulsive creatures, both recalling and flouting taxonomical norms. They move like 'monstrous slugs; though the things themselves had no resemblance to such in their contours; but minded [Winterstraw] of naked humans, very fleshy and crawling upon their stomachs' while the ends of two short arms 'appeared divided into hateful and wriggling masses of small tentacles' (p. 69). Claire McKechnie links these creatures to a Victorian fascination with frogs, because amphibians seemed to exist at an intersection in species categories. She suggests the weed men are 'on a deviant evolutionary path … the "wrong" track to amphibiousness'; impossibly combined with octopi parts as well, their Gothic wrongness generates the disgust and horror Winterstraw experiences.[32] The smell of fungi on the weed men's island leaves him 'near sickened with the abomination of it; but a memory of that foul thing [a weed man] which had come to the side of the boat… roused me to a terror beyond that of the sickness of my stomach' (p. 45). His nauseated response to the weed man informs Kelly Hurley's reading of them as abjected, abhuman embodiments of *fin-de-siècle* horror of bodily mutability and the crumbling of species integrity.[33]

The weed men's abominable resemblance to humans results in their abjection, in Hurley's reading, and their evolutionary deviancy in McKechnie's. However, seen in Miéville's terms as abcanny rather than abject, their alterity is emphasised instead. The monstrousness of both environment and animals is refracted through Winterstraw's personal emotional and physiological responses and his narration is not always reliable. He emphasises the barrenness of his surroundings; the Sargasso is a 'great waste', 'full of stagnation', the 'cemetery of the oceans' (pp. 28-9). This construction persists in his perception despite the abundant evidence to the contrary. 'Devil-creatures' may have 'inhabited that lonely weed-world', but it is nonetheless a place of 'incredible desolation'; the final remarks of his narrative likewise dwell on the 'desolation' (a favourite word) of 'desolate places' (p.103). Neither desolate sea nor abominable monsters qualify as life, because they do not fit his preconceived notions; they are rejected because of their difference. They are Other not only to normative body shapes but to normative constructions of 'natural'.

Winterstraw's very solipsism points to alternative readings below the surface of his narrative. The weed men also stand for an alternative, recapitulative evolution, in which the animals of the Sargasso Sea are not wrongly abhuman, but fit for their own environment. The threat

Winterstraw detects in them is the threat of usurpation by a species better fitted to this environment than humans. The weed men look like abominable corruptions of human form, but in their combination of parts they are uniquely adapted to the water, weed, and island of the Sargasso Sea, traversing with ease borderland environments in which humans are vulnerable. In the sea, they are seen efficiently 'swimming in one wake and keeping a very regular line' (p. 64); on land they move similarly skilfully with 'a surprising rapidity' (p. 69). Winterstraw does not expect such effective propulsion on land from creatures he has identified as 'monstrous slugs' (p. 64) or 'strange fish' (p. 69). In their specialised adaptation to the world of water, weed and land, the weed men, like the giant cuttle-fish and crabs with which they share the Sargasso, are also evolution gone right.

The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig' should also be read as an encounter between Western travellers and the residents of the uncharted 'Land of Lonesomeness' and 'weed-continent'. Winterstraw can be understood as a stand-in for the Western colonial traveller or explorer, representing normative imperialistic attitudes to exotic lands and animals. The intruders are castaways rather than collectors in these lands, but nevertheless seek their resources – water, wood, crabs for food. Winterstraw's first response to a bird-shaped 'excrescence' on a tree-trunk is 'a sudden thought that it would make me a curio' (p.18) – an idea inflected with imperial arrogance since he does not realise that the tree is alive (the plant later 'writhe[s]' and 'bleed[s] like any live creature' when attacked with a cutlass [p. 19]). The travellers' fascination with the monstrous form, though, is accompanied by intense fear, resulting in a violent response to perceived physical threat.

Although we are led to believe that the trees have consumed the man and woman belonging to the hulk on which the castaways are sheltering, whose faces are now 'of a part with the trunk of the tree' (p.19), the bo'sun strikes first without provocation. In response, the tree attacks George, the apprentice; Winterstraw responds with his own sword, and within a paragraph the castaways, back in their boats, are fleeing 'a multitude of things' amid a 'vast growling', having 'waked all that land of terror to a knowledge of our presence' (pp. 19-20). The whole environment animates to evict the intruders, including the stormy weather and the sea, which cries and moans to echo the bellowing and growling of the Land.

Neal Alan Spurlock describes the monsters of Hodgson's seas as 'ab-natural' and 'invasive', signs that 'our universe is under attack'.[34] He argues that they 'never seem to be living peacefully, or desire communication' but are characterised by 'hunger and an intense determination to attack the natural'.[35] Certainly a strong hostility to humans is common amongst the monsters, be they organic creatures or immaterial forces, of Hodgson's novels and stories.

However, the disastrous conclusion to the Land of Lonesomeness exploration, putting an end to any chance of co-existence, is arguably caused as much or more by the human intruders as by the monsters. The Sargasso Sea is 'a place where monsters of the deep and the weed have undisputed reign', and can be understood as a natural habitat invaded by the human characters, whether intentionally or not.[36] Occasions when monstrous animals are *not* actively hostile are significant.

In her discussion of Robinson's and Aubrey's stories, Price argues that within such *fin-de-siècle* tales of colonial exploration and intrusion lie suggestions that 'some wild places and things should remain unconquered. … Even within narratives that display fear and hatred towards man-eating plants there remains an undercurrent of concern for colonial ecology'.[37] Such an undercurrent is also discernible in *Boats*, through the bo'sun's violent response to the tree-monster, and later through the 'frightful' wound he inflicts on an injured giant cuttle-fish clamped to the boat. While it is inert and 'dazed with the brightness of the sun', he stabs it in the eye, so that it 'slid back into deep water, churning it into foam, and gouting blood' (p. 37). While survival, of course, depends on saving the boat, the animal's emphasised passivity at this point nonetheless highlights the brutality of the attack. Violence is not reserved for abhuman abominations, but is also deployed against more comprehensible creatures whose monstrousness is downplayed. Winterstraw's observation that the cuttle-fish is 'dazed' marks an unusual moment of sympathy with the animal, in distinct contrast to the spasms of 'extraordinary disgust' that leave him 'sick with loathing', and later 'dazed and sick' during encounters with the weed men (pp. 69-70). Winterstraw under attack by the weed men is here aligned with the cuttle-fish under attack by the castaways, hinting of the possibility of shared experiences between animals and humans.

Finally, *Boats* closes with a retrospective which curiously softens the abominableness even of the most monstrous creatures and asserts their rightful position in their environment. Winterstraw, who charitably houses the old bo'sun in a cottage on his estate, recounts that

> to this day he and I forgather, and let our talk drift to the desolate places of this earth, pondering upon that which we have seen – the weed-continent, where reigns desolation and the terror of its strange inhabitants. And, after that, we talk softly of the land where God hath made monsters after the fashion of trees. (p. 103)

Here, desolation and terror are accorded the status of ruling monarchs, and the tree-monsters are granted a place in the divine ordering of the natural world, alongside, therefore, humans and

other familiar plants and animals. Considered from a distance, they cease to be cast as abominable, and instead the novel leaves us with the suggestion of another world that should be left alone to the creatures that rightfully inhabit it.

The numerous creatures depicted in *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* replicate a continuing ambivalence over the status of the animal as both a troubling sign of bodily plasticity and a subjective creature at home in its own environment. Through relocation from familiar lands to uncharted ocean realms where humans are neither well-adapted nor the dominant species, the animal-human relationship is readjusted. Vint suggests that 'the very concept of the alien is one that expresses a human interest in – and struggle with – the reality of living with a different being'.[38] In Hodgson's narrative, there is no consistent resolution to this struggle; humans may flee, but they can never win. The globe is acknowledged to be shared, even if 'they' remain in their place and 'we' in ours.

'The Horror of the Heights' and 'The Air Serpent'

The sea was not the only environment in which abcanny encounters might be staged, although it undoubtedly informed conceptions of other imagined remote places, as we will shortly see. Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Horror of the Heights' (1913) recounts the adventure of a pioneering air-pilot, Mr Joyce-Armstrong, who sets out to explore the 'jungles of the upper air' reputed to exist around 40,000 feet altitude (p. 16). Like *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*, this story can also be read in colonial terms as an encounter between a European explorer and the exotic Others of a newly-discovered region. Joyce-Armstrong's expectations of conquest of the air are overturned; it is already inhabited by unknown creatures, and one monster's superior fitness to the environment enables it to drive him out by a violent encounter. Amid his persistently anthropocentric interpretations of his adventure, animal subjectivity and the creatures' right to exist in their own space are nonetheless exposed.

The heroism of the exploration is vaunted as a sign of human supremacy, as Joyce-Armstrong reflects during his ascent:

> There is surely something divine in man himself that he should rise so superior to the limitations which Creation seemed to impose—rise, too, by such unselfish, heroic devotion as this air-conquest has shown. Talk of human degeneration! When has such a story as this been written in the annals of our race? (p. 24)

Humans, it seems, can use technology to transcend their physical limits and achieve the 'conquest' of the sky, proving their superiority (again in the context of the divine ordering of creation) to the natural forces governing other animals and affirming their separation from the more-than-human world.

That separation is reflected in Joyce-Armstrong's detached observations of the upper regions. Beautiful, floating creatures 'as light and fragile as a soap-bubble … drifted past me, a wonderful fairy squadron of strange unknown argosies of the sky – creatures whose forms and substance were so attuned to these pure heights that one could not conceive anything so delicate within actual sight or sound of earth' (p. 29). He encounters 'air-snakes':

> long, thin, fantastic coils of vapour-like material, which turned and twisted with great speed … One of them whisked past my very face, and I was conscious of a cold, clammy contact, but their composition was so unsubstantial that I could not connect them with any thought of physical danger. … There was no more solidity in their frames than in the floating spume from a broken wave. (pp. 29-30)

These creatures are startling but not monstrous; finding them comparable to known equivalents – jelly–fish and snakes – Joyce-Armstrong feels no fear, only admiration and fascination.

The tension increases, however, on his next encounter with a 'monster' of 'formidable and threatening' appearance. It is transparent and 'jelly-like', buoyed by bubble-like bladders, with 'two vast, shadowy, circular plates upon either side, which may have been eyes, and a perfectly solid white projection between them which was as curved and cruel as the beak of a vulture' (p. 30). Joyce-Armstrong's comparisons with birds of prey are demonstrably inadequate, as the creature conspicuously overflows confinement to any one species category. Its jelly-like material and circular eyes recall marine invertebrates, it shoots 'sticky, serpent-like' tentacles at the aeroplane (p. 32), and it is also a whale-like 'mass of floating blubber' (p. 31) (here it is tempting to speculate that Doyle was remembering his own experiences of whale hunting during an expedition on the Peterhead whaler *Hope* in 1880).[39]

This unknown, uncategorisable creature is received as monstrous and repulsive; to Joyce-Armstrong it is 'misshapen', 'loathsome', a 'horrible escort' to his aeroplane. Moreover, it refuses a consistent form: it 'kept changing its colour' and '[s]o elastic and gelatinous was it that never for two successive minutes was it the same shape' (p. 31). Joyce-Armstrong interprets its shape and 'dark, angry purple' colour as aggression: 'I knew that it meant mischief. Every purple flush of its hideous body told me so. The vague, goggling eyes which were turned always upon

me were cold and merciless in their viscid hatred' (p. 31). Here, Joyce-Armstrong makes a number of presumptions. He is sure he knows the meaning of the creature's colour-changes, attributes it with human qualities of hatred and cruelty, and positions himself as its intentional target. The gap between his actual descriptions of the eyes – which are 'vague', 'shadowy', and only 'may have been' eyes – and his highly specific, secure readings of their expression leaves room for doubt.

Joyce-Armstrong's interpretation of the encounter is self-centred; he assumes he is an object of importance in the heights and, moreover, can account confidently for what happens. He escapes because his propeller shears off a tentacle and his gunshots puncture 'one of the great blisters upon the creature's back' leaving it 'writhing desperately to find its balance', allowing him to descend to safety (p. 32). The violence of the encounter is represented uncritically, justified as a battle between the heroic pilot and the merciless monster. Joyce-Armstrong, however, fails to consider that the creature might have alternative motivations (fear, curiosity, desire), to recognise that it is as 'attuned' to its environment as all the other animals of the heights, or to reflect on his own position as a technologically-superior invader. Although the monster of 'The Horror of the Heights' seems to be acknowledged to experience suffering, its perspective is subordinate to the narrative of human conquest (not least because we are reading Joyce-Armstrong's first person account). Instead, at the end of the story, Joyce-Armstrong, apparently not as prepared as Winterstraw to acknowledge that the creatures should be left alone in their own space, embarks on another air-exploration from which he never returns.

Will Tattersdill argues that Doyle was not oblivious to the possibility of animal consciousness (for example, as suggested by the intelligence of cetaceans), and shows how one account of his Arctic whale hunt positions him as 'face to face (or, rather, eye to eye) with a genuinely alien consciousness, one with strong resemblances to various imagined aliens in later works of science fiction'.[40] It has strong resemblances to Winterstraw's encounter with the dazed cuttle-fish in *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*, too, but shimmers more faintly through 'The Horror of the Heights' (Doyle's emphasis in his 1890s accounts is on the 'exciting work' of the whale hunt and especially the kill).[41] It is, in fact, Will A. Page's earlier 'The Air Serpent' that displays more of the ecological sensitivity suggested by these eye to eye encounters with marine giants.

'The Air Serpent', which has exactly the same premise as Doyle's story, precedes it by over a year and presents the weird animal rather differently. Here, too, the aviators consider themselves to be explorers of unknown regions. Ascending out of sight of the earth, above 7000 feet, they are 'absolutely alone in a new world. The sensation is indescribable. One feels that one has opened up a new territory, discovered a new realm, in which he alone is king' (p. 171). The new

territory is assumed to be empty, but their ascent soon challenges the limits of existing knowledge. At just over 23,000 feet they break the altitude record. At 36,000 feet, 'we saw IT': a 'gigantic monster of the air, lazily floating along on the ether, scarcely moving the great, finnish wings with which a wonderful creator had endowed it' (p. 173).

At first, this 'air serpent, for so I must call it', is fascinating rather than frightening, despite its transgressive physical composition being 'utterly unlike anything I have ever seen before'; it resembles

> a cross between a bat and a snake [with] twenty or thirty bat-like wings. … The head was enormous and it was not the head of a bird. Two great eyes, approximately a foot in diameter each, glared and blinked over a cavernous maw which opened and closed spasmodically as the creature breathed. (p. 171)

The narrator's dominant feeling is of awed admiration towards this 'gigantic, wonderful, monstrous THING' (p. 174). The 'thing' belies established zoology; it cannot be classified or labelled – that its head is 'not the head of a bird' creates a representational gap rather than a graspable image. Yet despite its weirdness, the narrator shows a degree of self-awareness and empathy.

Although attributing human characteristics to the creature, he makes an effort to consider the situation from its point of view: 'It followed us curiously […] as if it had not yet determined what manner of bird or beast this was which had invaded the upper realms where this creature alone seemed able to exist' (pp. 174-5). He acknowledges themselves and their plane as 'invaders' and recognises that to the (intelligent) air-serpent they are the animals, the 'prey' it hunts with 'incredible ingenuity' (p.174). The ensuing battle between the aviators and their 'enemy' (p. 175) reveals their unfitness, even assisted by their aircraft, to the atmospheric world. The air-serpent manoeuvres easily in the thin air while the plane labours to escape; the co-pilot is thrown from the aircraft and caught and swallowed as he falls. This consequence of the encounter between two species equally strange and puzzling to each other is presented as an accidental tragedy; no malice is attributed to the air-serpent's hunt. The story ends with an upbeat prediction of human capacity to revisit the upper regions and collect additional evidence, but it also acknowledges the air serpents' right to exist there; they are 'tenuous creatures living in a world of their own' (p. 176).

The narrators of 'The Air Serpent' and *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* both, then, retreat to an extent from assumptions of human dominance in new territories, and recognise that abcanny

animals, strange, monstrous, and fascinating, also have a claim on the world and a right to exist unmolested in their own spaces. Moments of empathy between narrators and animals hint at the possibility of exchange across alterity, suggesting there is some movement in conceptions of human-animal relationships. The stories are, however, equivocal about human-animal encounters. Many of the animals are constructed as monstrous, rendering them Other, with the effect of closing down opportunities for such mutual exchange. 'The Horror of the Heights', for example, is more resistant to the creatures' claims to their space, resulting in a violent encounter that highlights a gulf of understanding between human and animal. Hodgson's weed men, too, are rejected as monstrous in a (perhaps futile) effort by the characters to reaffirm their human identity and superiority.

As monstrous doubles of human bodies, however, the weed men also signal the close kinship between humans and other animals. Kinship and othering are not mutually exclusive: both work to structure human understanding of their place in the so-called natural order. That understanding is affected by a practical recognition that humans are not really the dominant species of the globe and that seemingly-monstrous creatures have a right, authorised by evolution (and sometimes also by ethics), to occupy their own environment. Indeed, in their own habitats, their claim is greater than that of human beings; they are fit for their environments, while humans, even when aided by technology, are poorly adapted and must eventually retreat. In contrast to *fin-de-siècle* narratives in which monsters invade human spaces such as cities, in these tales humans invade animals' spaces. The weird animals in these tales are successful species; the human becomes the 'other' within the natural environment of the 'monster'.

Weird monsters exhibit radical new forms, beyond current or traditional human knowledge. They are ambivalent, awe-inspiring monsters of terrible power, yet they are also natural animals, admirably adapted to strange realms; they necessitate looking differently at the world and at the relative places of humans and non-human animals within it. Read in ecological terms, these early twentieth-century weird fictions are relatively open to the forward-looking prospects of mutability, staging worlds in which human primacy is decentred, and admiring, amid the terror, the capacity of other beings to flourish there.

Tattersdill argues that the blank uncharted spaces of the Arctic combined with its unique astronomical perspective made the Pole sf's gateway to the stars at the *fin de siècle*, and that sf inevitably took its colonial tendencies with it when it left the planet.[42] The stories I've examined here suggest that this argument can be extended to the unknowableness of the deep sea and the upper atmosphere – as well as to the weird. Lovecraft's Cthulhu is an obvious example of another awesome weird tentacled abcanny monstrous form, implicated in a struggle for

domination and which can only be fled and left to its oceanic resting place.[43] Ultimately deriving from ancient stars, Cthulhu is also a descendent of Hodgson's weed men, as well as of the five Watchers of *The Night Land*.

The sf alien, I have suggested, owes at least part of its origin to the pages of *fin-de-siècle* weird tales, although it does not desert the weird for sf (which arguably never really part company anyway). This is not to suggest that subsequent representations of alien others follow a clear or consistent trajectory, however; the long-running *Alien* films (1979-2017), for example, waver between human-monster conflict and more complicated notions of hybridity, and enact dramas of dominance and colonisation.[44] Nonetheless, the weird continues as it began, as an important site in which political and ecological questions of human and non-human relationships overlap. By the time of Miéville's landmark *Perdido Street Station* (2000), a remarkable range of bodies (weird rather than sf not least because they are evolutionarily illogical or possess impossible skills), including beetle-headed khepri, amphibian vodyanoi, and hybrid Remade, could populate a cosmopolitan New Crobuzon characterised (if not always nicely) by inter-species exchange and in which human shape and intelligence have no greater intrinsic value than those of any other species.[45] Abcanny as they might sometimes be, '[t]he things,' as Ford Prefect once put it, 'are also people'.[46]

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Notes

[1] William Hope Hodgson, *The Night Land*, in *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels* (London: Gollancz, 2002 B), pp. 309-637; Algernon Blackwood, 'The Willows', in *The Listener and Other Stories* (London: Eveleigh Nash), pp. 127-203; H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Fiction* (New York: Dover, 1973), p. 7.

[2] William Hope Hodgson, *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*, in *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels* (London: Gollancz, 2002), pp. 3-103; Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Horror of the Heights', in *Tales of Terror and Mystery,* (London: John Murray, 1922), pp. 11-35; Will A. Page, 'The Air-Serpent', in Sam Moskowitz (ed.) *Science Fiction by Gaslight* (Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1974), p. 167-176. All subsequent references are parenthetical and to these editions.

[3] Sherryl Vint, *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

[4] Ibid., p. 6.

[5] H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2009); Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912).

[6] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Plymouth: Broadview, 2003).

[7] Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic Period Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 183.

[8] Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay (eds.), *Victorian Animal Dreams: representations of animals in Victorian literature and culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Rebecca Stott, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Aquarium Colonies and Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Marine Monstrosity', *Gothic Studies*, 2 (2000), pp. 305-327.

[9] Kelly Hurley, 'The Modernist Abominations of William Hope Hodgson', in Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (eds.) *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 129-149 (p. 133).

[10] For analyses of *fin-de-siècle,* Gothic and degeneration, including scientific contexts, see Stephan Karschay, *Degeneration, normativity and the Gothic at the fin de siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Linda Dryden, *The modern Gothic and literary doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Adrian Eckersley, 'A Theme in the Early Work of Arthur Machen:

"Degeneration"', *ELT*, 35 (1992), pp. 277-287; William Greenslade, *Degeneration, culture, and the novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994);

[11] Richard Marsh, *The Beetle* (Plymouth: Broadview, 2004); Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* (1894; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010).

[12] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: reading culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 6.

[13] Darwin remarked in an early notebook that the 'most monstrous form has a tendency to propagate, as well as diseases' (quoted in Ritvo, *Platypus,* p. 143); T. H. Huxley observed the tendency of monstrous variations, mutations to perpetuate themselves over several generations before dying out ('The causes of the phenomena of organic nature', in *Darwiniana: essays* [London: Macmillan, 1893], pp. 406-8.)

[14] Charles Darwin, *On the origin of species* (Plymouth: Broadview, 2004), pp. 122-3.

[15] Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 7.

[16] Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and other figments of the classifying imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 6.

[17] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[18] Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', in Aina Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Etsy (eds.), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 233-51; Val Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era', in William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (eds.), *Decolonizing Relationships with Nature* (London: Earthscan, 2003), pp. 51-78.

[19] Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Nature'.

[20] Ibid., p. 59.

[21] Vint, *Animal Alterity*, p. 10.

[22] Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Nature', p. 63.

[23] Cheryl Blake Price, 'Vegetable Monsters: Man-eating Trees in *fin-de-siècle* fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), pp. 311-327.

[24] China Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire', *Collapse* IV (2008), pp. 105-128 (p. 105).

[25] Miéville, 'Quantum Vampire', p. 106.

[26] For a detailed discussion, see Harman Graham, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero, 2012).

[27] China Miéville, 'On Monsters: Or, Nine or More (Monstrous) Not Cannies', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 3 (2012): 377-392 (p. 381).

[28] EcoGothic is an emerging area of enquiry; see Andrew Smith and William Hughes (eds.), *EcoGothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); David Del Principe (ed.) 'The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century, *Gothic Studies* 16, vol. 1 (2014).

[29] Miéville, 'On Monsters'.

[30] China Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', in Mark Bould, Andrew M Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 510-515 (pp. 512-513).

[31] See Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886; London: Penguin, 2003); Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Constable, 1897); Bram Stoker, *The Lair of the White Worm* (London: Rider, 1911).

[32] Claire McKechnie, *The Human and the Animal in Victorian Gothic Scientific Literature* (University of Edinburgh, 2010), p. 110.

[33] Hurley, *Gothic Body.*

[34] Neal Alan Spurlock, 'Ab-Reality: the Metaphysical Vision of William Hope Hodgson', *Sargasso: the Journal of William Hope Hodgson Studies*, 1 (2013), pp. 117-137 (p. 134).

[35] Ibid., p.132.

[36] William Hope Hodgson, 'From the Tideless Sea', in *Men of the Deep Waters* (Aegypan, 2006), p. 82.

[37] Price, 'Vegetable Monsters', p. 314.

[38] Vint, *Animal Alterity*, p. 136.

[39] Doyle detailed the thrills of whale hunting in at least two articles in the 1890s: Anon, 'His Arctic Experiences', *Salt Lake Herald*, October 7 (1894), p.20. https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/80974100/ [Date accessed: 18 May 17]; Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Life on a Greenland Whaler,' *Strand Magazine: an illustrated monthly*, 13.73 (1897), pp. 16-25. http://search.proquest.com [Date accessed: 18 May 17]. For discussion, see Will Tattersdill, *Science, Fiction, and the Fin-de-siècle Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 169-71.

[40] Tattersdill, *Science, Fiction*, p. 170.

[41] Doyle, 'Life on a Greenland Whaler', p. 23.

[42] Tattersdill, *Science, Fiction*, p. 172.

[43] H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3: The Haunter of the Dark*. (London: HarperCollins, 2000) pp. 61-98.
[44] The series begins with *Alien*, dir. by Ridley Scott, 20th Century Fox (1979), and so, far ends with *Alien: Covenant* (2017).
[45] China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* (London: Pan, 2000).
[46] Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980; London: Macmillan, 2010), p. 84.